

'Tis the Season (for Home Fires)

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As the Christmas season approaches, many of us are decorating our homes, finalizing our wish lists and planning big meals. During this exciting time, however, we must not forget the holidays also bring an increased risk of home fires.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, December and January are the peak months for home fires, deaths and injuries. Families looking to spread holiday cheer should be aware that each year an average of 240 home fires start with Christmas trees and an additional 1,300 begin with various other seasonal decorations. When decorating your home this holiday season, keep the following information in mind.

Trees

Fire is the primary concern with a live Christmas tree, which is often brought on by the combination of electrical malfunctions and a drying tree. To help cut the risk of tree fires, always purchase a freshly cut tree. A good test of a tree's freshness is to hold a branch between your thumb and forefinger and pull your hand toward you. If the tree is fresh, it should lose very few needles.

It's also a good idea to do the bump test. Bump the base of the trunk against the ground and see if an excessive amount of needles fall off. It's normal for a tree to lose a few needles; however, a lot of falling needles could signal the tree is drying out and could soon become a fire hazard.

Once you get your tree home — and before you put it in a stand — consider cutting an inch or so off the bottom of the trunk. Sap can seal the base of pre-cut trees, hindering their ability to absorb water. Once the tree has a fresh cut, make sure the stand's water reservoir is large enough and kept full at all times. Stands should provide 1 quart of water per inch of trunk diameter. The average 6-foot tree has a 4-inch diameter trunk and can consume as much as 4 quarts, or 1 gallon, of water per day. For those who forget to keep their tree watered, an automatic waterer would be a wise investment.

When selecting a location for the tree, make sure it is not close to a heat source such as a radiator or furnace vent, which could cause it to dry out faster. Also, never place a tree near a fireplace because sparks can ignite the branches, decorations and gifts underneath. Keep your tree at least three feet from fireplaces, radiators, space heaters, heating vents and other sources of heat, and don't place it where it could block an exit.

It's also important to consider how long you plan to display your tree. The NFPA recommends you take down even a well-watered tree after four weeks. So, if you decorate your live tree immediately after Thanksgiving, it should be discarded the week after Christmas, not the week after New Year's Day.

Lights

Another concern with a live Christmas tree is the fire danger brought on by electrical malfunctions. Examine holiday lights, extension cords and other electrical items whether they are new or old. All of these items should feature the Underwriters Laboratories mark (the letters UL inside a circle), which means samples of the product have been tested for the risk of fire, electric shock and other hazards.

Before plugging in lights and other electrical decorations, inspect them for frayed cords, cracked sockets, broken bulbs, or burned plugs and signs of wear and damage. It's best to position the tree in a corner or a less-traveled area near an outlet to eliminate the use of an extension cord. If you do need an extension cord, make sure you run it along a wall so it won't be a trip hazard.

If using lights, decorations and extension cords outside, it is important to ensure they are rated for outdoor use. These items will be clearly marked with a red holographic UL symbol. Indoor-only lights, decorations and extension cords are marked with a green holographic UL symbol, but you can safely use both red- and green-marked items indoors. Also, don't use nails or staples to hang your lights. Instead, purchase plastic hooks or clips that are designed for hanging light strings. Always be sure to unplug tree lights and decorations before leaving home or going to bed. For more information on holiday electrical safety, see the story "Ho-ho-holiday Hazards" below.

Candles

December is also the peak time for home candle fires. In fact, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and New Year's Eve are among the top five days of the year for home candle fires. Candles are responsible for at least 71 percent of December home fires due to improper decorating practices or candles left unattended.

Candles should never be used as Christmas tree ornaments. Furthermore, they should be kept away from decorations, curtains, walls, bedding, paper, furniture and other combustible material, as well as places or paths where they could be accidentally knocked over. Make sure you use sturdy, noncombustible candleholders that will collect dripping wax. Remember to always blow out your candles before you leave your home or go to sleep.

Smoke detectors

Of course, all homes should have working smoke detectors installed. Make sure you test your smoke detectors every month to ensure they're in proper working condition, and change the batteries every six months. A good rule of thumb is to use the change to Daylight Saving Time as a reminder to replace the batteries.

Conclusion

Decorations are supposed to brighten the holiday season. When decorating your home this year, make safety a priority. With just a little bit of effort, you can help ensure your family has a safe and happy home for the holidays.

FYI

Ho-ho-holiday Hazards

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Decorating the home for the holiday season is a great tradition. Don't forget, however, an essential part of stringing the lights and putting up the Christmas tree is keeping an eye on electrical safety. Here are a few

simple steps to help ensure you have a safe and happy holiday season:

- Don't overload electric circuits. Check fuses or circuit breaker panels to see what your home can handle and stay well within the limits.
- Avoid putting too many strings of lights together and plugging them into a single outlet.
- Watch for flickering lights; sparks from appliances or wall outlets; warm plates, plugs or outlets; and dimming lights or television screens. These signal potential danger spots that could cause an electrical fire.
- Make sure there's a bulb in each socket. If a bulb burns out, leave it in until you have a replacement. Immediately replace any broken bulbs that have exposed filaments.
- Use only Underwriters Laboratory-approved equipment. Check for frayed cords, cracked insulation and damaged plugs.
- Surge protector strips are a safe option if you need more outlets, but don't daisy chain them together.
- Match plugs with outlets. Never force a three-pronged plug into a two-hole outlet or extension cord.
- Don't run extension cords under rugs, around furniture legs or across doorways.
- If you have children in the house or are expecting young visitors, inspect your home for cracked or missing outlet covers. Use safety caps to cover outlets.
- Keep live Christmas trees watered to prevent bulbs from igniting dry branches. Never use electrical decorations on metal trees. Instead, place colored spotlights beside or above the tree. If using an artificial tree, make sure you purchase one that is fire retardant.
- Fasten outdoor lights securely to trees, house walls or other firm supports using plastic hooks or clips. Do not nail, tack, pinch, nick or stress wiring.
- Outdoor lighting should have insulated electrical cords and be plugged into a ground fault circuit interrupter protected receptacle only. Keep all plugs and connectors off the ground and away from puddles and snow.

Don't let your holidays end in tragedy. Make electrical safety a priority this Christmas and be sure to carry it through the New Year and beyond.